Remembrance: Gilbert Wheeler Beebe, 1912–2003

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Gilbert Beebe died on March 3, 2003, 1 month short of his 91st birthday and 2 days after working a full Saturday at the office. Gil was renowned as a radiation epidemiologist. He conducted ground-breaking studies of mortality and morbidity among persons exposed to the atomic bombings in Japan and to the Chernobyl reactor accident in Ukraine.

His 70 years as a statistician/epidemiologist spanned several careers. Gil first worked at the National Committee on Maternal Health, where he conducted an important study of contraceptive services in economically depressed areas. From there he went to the office of the Surgeon General of the Army, and then to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). Gil and others (including Michael DeBakey) had been advocating an ongoing follow-up system based on military and medical records, and it was at the NAS that Gil created the Medical Follow-up Agency (MFUA) to accomplish that. While at NAS, Gil worked with Seymour Jablon to organize the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) research program to study the late health effects of radiation exposure in Japanese A-bomb survivors. Later known as the Life Span Study, this remains the most important source of information on radiation-related risk of cancer and other long-term health effects in humans.

At age 65, Gil began his fifth career at the National Cancer Institute, where he worked for 25 years. After the Chernobyl accident, Gil led international studies of thyroid cancer and leukemia among radiation-exposed populations in Belarus and Ukraine. When Gil retired from NCI in 2002, he continued to work 6 days a week as Scientist Emeritus. Gil's family, friends, and colleagues honored him last year at the National Academy of Sciences first annual Beebe Symposium.

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Throughout his careers, Gil was the right man in the right place. His work ethic and wisdom, combined with creativity and unusual intellectual generosity, made him a wonderful role model for 3 generations of radiation epidemiologists and statisticians. He patiently listened to others, suggested new ideas, and stimulated young investigators. Gil loved work—one would probably say he was a workaholic—and yet he found time to raise 4 children, participate in community group discussions, and attend office celebrations (typically arriving with a few bottles of wine). Gil added a special presence to his environment, wherever he was.

Without fanfare, Gil Beebe created a remarkable legacy in the fields of epidemiology and radiation and in the scientific community at large. We will miss him.